

**whenever you're around, i always seem to smile. by
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Summary:

Will Byers struggles with being gay and having a crush on Steve Harrington.

whenever you're around, i always seem to smile.

The first time the word “faggot” has any real meaning to Will, he’s ten years old. He’s been called that plenty of times by his dad, but when he asked what it meant, Jonathan and his mother would just brush it off, telling him it wasn’t true. He’d figured it meant the same thing as “bitch” or “cunt,” which were names Lonnie often called his mom. They were hurtful, but they didn’t mean anything in particular.

He’s sitting in class staring at the new transfer student. Something about the boy is different than the other boys in Will’s class. He’s entranced by him, it’s like he’s put a spell on him or something. The only person he’s ever felt that way about is Luke Skywalker, and Luke was a fictional character, so he didn’t really count. Will figured it was just because Luke was Luke. He was his hero! Of course he wouldn’t be able to keep his eyes off of him whenever he was on screen. He got the same feeling in his stomach when he looked at the transfer student.

Will was well aware that most boys only got that feeling around girls. Girls were nice, but there wasn’t really anything special about them. The only girl that Will really cared about aside from his mother was Princess Leia, and he didn’t talk about her the way that his friends did. He saw her as a role model, as someone to look up to. Dustin, Mike and Lucas talked about her like they wanted to kiss her. Will didn’t want to kiss anybody, but if he did, he’d want to kiss Luke. He’d known enough not to say that aloud to anyone, not wanting them to think that he was weird for not being into Leia. It had nothing to do with her being a girl and Luke being a boy. It was just about fitting in.

But then Troy throws a piece of paper and hits Will in the back of his head, knocking him out of his trance. When he opens it up, it reads “faggot” in big, black, bold letters. At recess, Troy and James confront him. “I saw you staring at the new kid, Byers,”

“I wasn’t staring,” he mutters.

“Yeah, you were. You were staring at him and thinking about

how you can turn him into a queer like you,”

Will doesn't know what a queer is. He can't deny it because maybe he is one. "Shut up. Maybe you were the one staring,"

"What did you just say?" asks James.

Troy takes Will by the collar and holds him up. "Just being near a fairy like you makes me want to throw up. You and what you and your people do is disgusting. The world would be better off without faggots like you who want to kiss dudes. Freaks,"

He throws him onto the ground and flips him off before walking away, James trailing behind him.

So that's what a faggot is. It's a boy who likes boys. Had his father known how he felt about Luke? He'd never mentioned it, how could he possibly know? Had he really been that obvious? And how did Troy know that he thought the new kid was cute? Could he read his mind or something? Boys looked at each other all the time. That was normal! When he had a conversation with one of his friends, was he supposed to not look them in the eye? Did that make him a faggot? Being one was so obviously wrong, especially if no one else he knew was one. It made him a freak of nature, someone who wasn't supposed to exist.

Maybe, it was even the reason that his dad had left them.

Will decided that day that he wasn't going to be a queer anymore. He wouldn't watch *Star Wars* anymore if it meant fantasizing about holding Luke's hand. He wouldn't look at boys for any longer than necessary. The one thing he couldn't help was his art, which Lonnie had always said was "total faggotry." Drawing and painting made Will so happy, it was his absolute favorite thing in the world. He couldn't just give up on it. And besides, Pablo Picasso was a famous artist and he wasn't a fag. You could like art and be normal. It was just the other stuff that had to go.

Troy and James still called him those awful names. His father still made snide remarks about him on the rare occasion that he visited. Will cried every time, wondering what else he could do to be normal.

He still didn't feel anything for girls, no matter how much older he got or how much harder he tried. He tells Mike, Dustin and Lucas that he has a crush on Jennifer Hayes, the most popular girl in school. That's what normal guys did, right? They always had a crush on the popular girl. He feels nothing for her. Looking at her doesn't make him feel the way he does when he looks at Mike. It's so embarrassing and he's ashamed of it because it must make him seem like such a creep, but Will's heart grows larger every time Mike smiles at him. He could never tell Mike that. He'd never want for Mike to think of him the way that Troy and James do.

In the Upside Down, the most comforting place is Mike's bedroom. Will wanders there on the third day and curls up on his bed, pretending that Mike was beside him. If Mike were there with him, everything would be better, no matter how queer that sounded.

As soon as he returns to the real world, Will does everything he can to pretend that those thoughts of Mike had been nothing but friendly. He has too many things to worry about – he doesn't need to add a hopeless crush on his best friend to that list. And when he's in Hawkins Lab with all the cords hooked up to him, there's the voice in the back of his head telling him that the doctors will be able to tell that he's a fag. They'll pull Joyce aside and they'll say "Your son is a homosexual" and then they'll lock him up and he'll never see anyone he cares about again.

That doesn't happen. He does get locked up and he does go through literal hell, but no one knows the truth about him when it's all over. If Will has anything to be thankful for, it's that.

The other thing that came out of the whole possession thing that he has to be thankful for is Steve Harrington.

Steve Harrington is the most beautiful man that Will has ever seen in his entire life. And he's *real*. He's right there in front of him. He could reach right out and hold his hand if he worked up the nerve.

Steve had saved his friends. Steve had helped save *him*.

Steve was always around. He gave Dustin rides places and had

taken to baking them snacks for campaigns. He braided Max's hair and painted Eleven's nails. He taught Lucas how to properly shoot baskets and he gave Dustin all the advice in the world and he tried his best with Mike, no matter how much Mike insisted on bickering with him. Will knew that Mike did that for Nancy's sake. Will didn't understand Nancy. Steve was absolutely perfect. Will loves Jonathan, but Nancy was absolutely insane for choosing him over Steve.

Steve makes Will feel good about himself. When he chooses a nail polish color for El or Max, he does it so effortlessly, like there's nothing wrong with a boy knowing about girl stuff. Will starts to feel like maybe it's okay to be a queer. Maybe he is normal.

He draws pictures of Steve every night until he gets one absolutely perfect. He wants to give one to Steve, show him that he's special to him. He hides his sketchbook from his mom and Jonathan and never brings it to school anymore. Even though he doesn't hate himself for liking Steve, he still doesn't want them to know. Maybe it'd be romantic that way, if it were more private.

One day after a campaign that Steve had stayed for, Will confronts him in the driveway. Dustin and Lucas were sleeping over at Mike's, El still wasn't allowed out after dark so she'd never come in the first place and Max was in the kitchen, chatting with Mrs. Wheeler while Steve waited outside for her. Will is so nervous that he thinks his heart is going to beat right out of his chest.

"Steve?" he whispers cautiously.

"What's up, little dude? You have fun tonight?"

Will blushes. "Um, yeah. I did. Did you?"

"Don't tell the others, but yeah. Your friends aren't so bad all the time," Steve winks at him and Will feels so special. This is a secret between just him and Steve. Just for them.

Will takes a deep breath and reaches into his backpack to pull out his sketchbook. "Um, Steve, can I – can I – I um, I made you something. Can I show it to you?"

Steve raises his eyebrows, shocked. "Of course. Of course you can,"

He's so nice. Of course he'd be so nice. Will doesn't know what he'd been expecting. He flips it to the page of his perfect drawing – a picture of Steve's face surrounded by the prettiest flowers, even though Will thought that Steve was far prettier. He hands it over to him and his heart soars when Steve looks like he's going to cry.

Steve just stares at it for a moment before a smile flickers on his lips. "It's – it's . . . thank you, Will, wow. Thank you so much. This is like . . . the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me. Although I gotta say, you made me much better looking than I actually am,"

"You really like it?" Will asks.

"I *love* it. Can I keep it?"

"Of course! It's for you!"

Steve wipes at one of the tears threatening to fall and bends down to put both his hands on Will's shoulders. "I'm gonna hang it up in my room as soon as I get home tonight. Seriously though, this is the best present that I've ever gotten,"

Will thinks that this is the happiest he's ever been in his whole life. This moment has made everything that's happened in the past year and a half so completely worth it. Steve doesn't think his drawing is faggy, he thinks it's great. It makes Will feel like maybe he *is* great. Maybe that means that being a homo isn't all that bad. Steve does things like paint nails and care about his hair and people still like him just the same. Maybe that means that if Will tells people how he feels about boys, it'll be okay.

He isn't ready just yet, though.

Will gets rides with Steve instead of Jonathan. He sits next to him when Steve sneaks the boys in to see an R rated movie. He draws him more pictures and each time, Steve is just as grateful. Steve doesn't tell the others about the pictures and it makes Will feel like it's their secret thing, like how Jonathan and Nancy have their own secret

things. The age difference between him and Steve isn't that big. When they get older, it won't even matter.

It's okay if Mike is with Eleven. Will will be with Steve Harrington.

And then one day, when Will asks Steve for a ride to the mall, Steve crouches down and rubs at his forehead. "I think maybe you should ask your brother for a ride,"

"Why?" Will's face falls instantly.

"I think that maybe it hurts his feelings that we hang so much now. Don't you think he wants to hang with you too?" Steve's voice is soft and it never gets like that with any of the others, like Will is so sensitive that he needs to be coddled. Will feels like such a baby, but he also feels like maybe this is a good thing. Jonathan and Mike talk softly to Nancy and Eleven. Maybe this is romantic.

"I mean . . . he'd rather spend time with Nancy. I don't want to bother him. I've put him through enough," Will admits sadly.

Steve visibly sighs. "Your brother loves you. You're not some nuisance,"

Will doesn't know how to admit that he'd rather spend time with Steve even if Steve's words about Jonathan were true. "I just . . . I thought I should give him a break. I can go ask him instead if you don't want to take me, it's okay,"

Will turns to leave and Steve grabs at his hand, making Will's heart race. "No, dude, are you kidding? I love hanging out with you. We're bros. I just want to make sure you're not hurting your real brother's feelings,"

Bros? Steve saw him as a brother? A brother . . . he saw Will the same way that Jonathan did. If Will was any other kid, it would've taken everything in him not to cry. After everything that had happened, Will couldn't cry over something like this. It would take an earthquake breaking the world into two for him to cry ever again. Still, he felt like shit for thinking that he'd ever have a future with

Steve. He wasn't gay! He wasn't a freak like Will and even if he was, he'd never like Will. Will was a murderer, a monster. Steve was far too good for him, just like Mike was. He shouldn't have been so stupid.

"Yeah. Okay." Will mutters, not looking Steve in the eye.

"Okay," Steve repeats, holding out his hand for a high five. Will high fives him, and then runs away quickly to join Max and El over by a picnic table.

It's only a couple of days later when Will is watching a movie with Jonathan at home, and one of the characters calls somebody a fag. So much has been going through Will's head lately that he gets the courage to say, "Why do people call each other that?"

Jonathan looks at him. "Uh, I don't know. It's an insult. They just want to hurt you,"

"Why does it have to be an insult? Doesn't it just mean a boy who likes boys? Why is that so wrong?"

"It isn't," Jonathan clarifies, moving closer to him like he'd prepared for this conversation. "There's nothing wrong with a boy who likes boys or a girl who likes girls. A lot of bad people just think that it isn't normal and they use words like 'fag' to make those people feel bad,"

"So then Dad is bad," Will whispers.

Jonathan puts his hand on his cheek. "Dad didn't deserve you. Whoever you are, Will, Mom and I will always love you. Tell me you know that by now,"

Will nods. He's always known that, despite the voice in the back of his mind telling him that they wouldn't. They'd been through too much together for them to just give up on him. "I do,"

"Good. Anyone who uses words like that doesn't deserve you. Not even your buddy Steve . . ."

"What?" All of the happiness and the comfort in Will's chest

disappeared.

“I don’t want you to get hurt. He’s just . . . I know he uses words like that. He’s called me that,” Jonathan states uncomfortably. He’s sad to admit this to Will, but he sees the way that Will looks at Steve.

Will can feel a weight in his chest forming. He’s not supposed to get upset over things like this. Everybody in the world thinks that there’s something wrong with him, it shouldn’t be a surprise that Steve thinks he’s a freak too. Steve is supposed to be like him, though. Steve is supposed to like “girly” things like Will does. He doesn’t though because Steve is normal. Steve isn’t a faggot like he is. Will hates himself so much, he feels absolutely disgusting for having a crush on another boy, especially one like Steve. Steve wasn’t gay and Steve hated queers like Will. Once he found out that Will was a queer, Steve wouldn’t want to be his ‘brother’ anymore. Steve would refuse to even be in the same room as him.

Jonathan sees the heartbreak on his face. “It’s okay,” he whispers. “He’s wrong, you know? You’re great just the way you are,”

“I don’t . . . Steve . . .”

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up about him,” says Jonathan.

Steve’s beautiful face is all that Will can see. He’s too lovely to be hateful. Jonathan has to be wrong, he has to just be bitter about Steve being more popular than him. Yes, that’s it. Jonathan is lying. Steve was right – Jonathan doesn’t like the time that Will spends with Steve. He’s just trying to keep them apart. That’s a far better reality than the one that Jonathan wants Will to believe.

Will stands up from the couch. “You’re wrong,”

“Will . . .”

“No! You’re lying! Steve would never call me that . . .” he backs away towards the front door. Jonathan gets up, as if to follow him. “You don’t know anything!”

Will takes off, running away from his house. Jonathan calls after

him, but doesn't chase him. He knows where Will is going anyway.

He's still not crying. Will can't cry no matter how hard he tries to. He thinks that his heart may be broken, but maybe it was already broken. Maybe he'd tricked himself into thinking that Steve could fix it; fix him. There was no fixing Will Byers. He was a queer and a faggot. He was a monster, a ghost of the boy that he'd once been. Even someone as wonderful as Steve Harrington couldn't repair him.

Will knocks at Steve's front door, feeling agitated and restless. Only Steve's car sits in the driveway; his parents must be out again. Will barely notices this, all he can think about is talking to Steve and demanding answers from him.

Steve opens the door wearing a sweatshirt and matching sweatpants. He'd clearly just been sleeping and yet he still looks absolutely stunning. Will hates him for that.

"Will? Hey buddy, what are you doing here?" he asks, rubbing at his eyes.

Will doesn't wait for Steve to invite him in and storms past him. "Did you call Jonathan a fag? Or a queer, or a homo or whatever it was?"

Steve seems surprised, his eyebrows raised in confusion. It took him a few moments but then he remembered. "Yeah, I . . . it was a long time ago. I shouldn't have – why are you asking?"

"You hate people like that then. Jonathan was right . . ." Will mutters.

Steve shakes his head, sighing. "No, no, no. What? What's going on? Why is this being brought up?"

"Why does it matter? Why would you say something like that?"

Steve finally closed the front door and made his way towards Will. He rubs at his forehead, trying to think clearly. "I – I – I don't . . . it was a while ago. I don't – I shouldn't have said it. I'm an asshole, I'm a fucked up person who's said fucked up things. I said a lot of fucked up things . . . I'm sorry . . ."

“But why? Do you think it’s wrong?” Will pauses for a second and takes a deep breath. “I’m – I’m – I’m gay,”

The word feels so foreign on his tongue. He’s never said it out loud and even in his mind, he’s always just referred to himself as a queer. ‘Gay’ seems official. It seems final.

“I don’t want you to hate me,” Will whispers and he hates himself so fucking much. “I can’t change it. I’m sorry,”

Steve stares at him like he’s hurt, like his heart is the one that’s breaking. He’s not so tired anymore suddenly and he sits down on the couch, patting the cushion for Will to sit next to him. Will does so, making sure to sit further away from Steve than he normally would.

“I – I – you know, I – maybe,” Steve starts over multiple times before finally settling on the right words. “I could never hate you, Will. You’re a wonderful person. You’re one of the best people I’ve ever known,”

Will shakes his head. “Don’t lie to me! I’m shit! Bob and all those people at the lab are dead because of me. I’m a killer. I’m not . . . I’m not . . .”

“No, no, no, no. That wasn’t your fault. You were being manipulated and tricked and you were scared. You warned everyone when the time came. Everyone makes mistakes, believe me, I would know,” Steve states and Will doesn’t interrupt him this time. “You’re so kind and sweet and *good*. You are so good and you haven’t let this fucked up world break you,”

Will knows that that isn’t the truth and that he’s just good at hiding his feelings.

“I used to believe in those words, yes,” Steve admits, looking away from him. “I think everyone has at some point. The world said that being gay was bad and I just believed it. I don’t believe it anymore – I’m sorry. I’m so sorry if I hurt Jonathan. He’s a much better person than I’ll ever be, he didn’t deserve it,”

The ache in Will’s chest slowly lessens.

"You know I was in love with a boy once," Steve says after a few moments of silence. Will looks up at him and he can't believe what he's hearing. "My best friend, Tommy. I didn't realize it for a while, and then one night we got drunk and I kissed him. He told me to never do it again. And it was always there, any time we talked after that, that kiss was the only thing on my mind. Sometimes when I think about it now, I think that maybe he kinda used it against me,"

Will feels lost and it makes him feel like an idiot for not understanding. "But . . . you dated Nancy. You like girls,"

Steve shrugs, "I do. I like girls and boys. Maybe when I called Jonathan a queer, I was just angry that I thought Nancy liked him better. Like maybe she saw right through me pretending that I only liked girls. Maybe she knew I was a queer," He bites his lip and turns away from Will yet again.

Maybe a week ago, Will would've felt hopeful when Steve admitted that he liked boys. Now he feels different about it. He just feels . . . okay. Normal, perhaps.

"How did you know you were in love with your friend?" Will asks.

"I didn't feel the way about him that I did with my other friends. I'd think about him all the time, y'know? I'd catch myself staring at him for too long. I wished he would kiss me when he was kissing his girlfriend. Mostly, I just loved being around him. He made me feel happy to be alive,"

Tears began to well up in Will's eyes then. He guesses that maybe he wasn't so immune to crying after all. Still, the next words are so difficult for him to say that it made sense for him to get emotional. "I think . . . I think I'm in love with Mike,"

Steve nods and puts his hand on his shoulder. "Those Wheelers really do have something about them, don't they?"

Will smiles then. When he'd started liking Steve, his fear of being in love with Mike had been pushed to the back of his mind. It was like he didn't need to worry about his real feelings coming out if he

had a pretty, single boy to dream about. "I'm afraid to tell him. I don't think that I can tell him. He loves El,"

Steve doesn't know what to say to that. Will presses on, "How do you deal with it? Like when you see Jonathan with Nancy, how do you stop being sad?"

"You don't," Steve admits sadly. "You just keep hurting and hope that one day you'll be able to tell yourself that you deserve better and actually believe it,"

"Has that day come for you?"

"No. But I'm not you. I deserve to be in pain. I'm not – I *am* shit. I'm . . . it's dumb. Whatever. Jonathan's better for Nancy, anyway,"

"I would've picked you," Will says a little too quickly.

Steve chuckles. "I certainly hope you'd choose to date me over your brother,"

Will blushes. "No, I mean, even if he wasn't my brother. I'd pick you over anyone – except maybe Mike. You're not shit. You saved my friends and you didn't have to. You just let Nancy go because you wanted her to be happy. You just want everyone to be happy,"

"I don't think I'm ever gonna believe I'm anything but a piece of shit," says Steve. Will wishes so desperately that he could say something to change his mind.

"You're perfect just the way you are," he says anyway.

"So are you, man," Steve grins. "And I'm sorry again about what I said. I can never make up for it, I know that, but I'm still sorry. And I don't feel that way about you or anyone else. I never could. Myself, sure, but not anybody else,"

Will understands. He feels the same way. He didn't think that he'd ever be able to find someone like him in his real life and now here he was, relating to Steve god damn Harrington. Jonathan was never going to believe it – not that Will could tell him. He wouldn't want Steve telling everyone that he was gay. He was going to keep

this secret, and it would be something that he and Steve could talk about when no one else was around. Not exactly romantic, but friendly. That's how Will was seeing Steve right now. He wasn't some dream boy – he was a person.

Steve wasn't perfect. Will had been blinded by his feelings, unable to see the flaws on the outwardly perfect boy. On the inside though, he was troubled. He had problems – not as many as Will, but he had them. Nobody was perfect. Still, Steve liked girls and boys. He liked boys. And Steve was still the coolest person in the world to Will and to his friends. It didn't matter that he was a queer. It wouldn't matter that Will was a queer either – even though Mike wasn't, and he would never love Will the way that he loved Eleven. Whatever. Will had been through all levels of hell and he was still standing. He could take people not accepting him for who he was, as long as the people who mattered stayed by his side.

“Thanks, Steve,” Will says and gives him a hug.

Steve hugs him back and ruffles his hair. “You're a good man, Will Byers,”